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Public Health Administration and the Citizen

Public health administration in a community is as extensive, and the health department is as efficient, as the people want it to be. Health administration can neither exceed to any great extent, nor lag far behind the wishes of the people. An interesting illustration of this is the experience of the city of Wilmington, N.C., during the last two or three years. Two years ago public meetings were held in protest against the extension of public health work, while recently a mass meeting rallied to the support of the health department in opposition to the expressed intention of the majority of the city council to curtail the department budget. An account of the recent citizens' meeting in support of the health department is given in the following letter from Prof. Stiles: (See page 564)

THE SURGEON GENERAL,

U. S. Public Health Service, Washington, D. C.

SIR: This evening there was held in Wilmington, N.C., one of the most remarkable public-health meetings I have ever attended. It was a citizens' mass meeting, called by prominent citizens and attended by 500 to 600 men, many of them among the most prominent leaders in the city and county.

It was called to consider the action of the city council in cutting down, by about \$5,000, the budget as presented by the county board of health and as approved by the county commissioners. This cut in the budget would result in a reduction of the two full-time health officers to one, a reduction in the number of the sanitary police, and an elimination of the sanitary engineer. For several years past there has been a considerable amount of lack of harmony in reference to the health work. The health office has had an uphill fight against various elements, but has increased in efficiency and activities, notwithstanding the opposition.

Two years ago two public protest meetings were held to voice public sentiment against the action of the health office. To-night the protest was against limiting the work and the expansion of the health office.

In the city council, the mayor and one councilman were in favor of the budget, while four councilmen expressed themselves against portions of it. A committee of citizens appeared before the council and requested the opposing councilmen to change their attitude. One councilman was won over, but three stood out against certain details in the budget. This action resulted in the meeting this evening. The council had been invited to attend, but only the mayor and one councilman appeared.

The meeting unanimously indorsed the budget as originally proposed, and provided for the appointment of a committee of 25 citizens to appear before the council to urge reconsideration of its action.

The meeting was the occasion of a calm discussion of the value of and necessity for health work. It was a meeting, not of a political party, but of heads of families, who calmly but firmly demanded that no backward step be taken in respect to the protection of the women and children against unnecessary sickness. It was a practical answer to the question whether the present day campaign for better sanitary conditions is making progress. No one could attend the meeting without feeling the serious and encouraging significance involved. It is apparent that the leading citizens of the city of Wilmington and the county of New Hanover are determined that no reasonable effort shall be omitted to make the locality as healthful as modern sanitary science can make it. The citizens seemed to realize the difference between cheapness and economy.

A mere recital of the facts conveys but a faint idea of the significance of this unusual spectacle. Fathers of families plead seriously, earnestly, calmly, eloquently, that no backward step be taken, but that the lives and health of the women and children be surrounded by every safeguard within reason.

Politics, financial considerations, even the well-earned reputation of the city and county were kept in the background. The keynote of the entire meeting was that health work must be kept in the line of progress, and that the lives of women and children were to be held above all other considerations.

Wilmington and New Hanover have to-night set to the entire country an intelligent and an inspiring example.

Respectfully,
C. W. STILES,
Professor of Zoology.

